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Letter from Taizé

Preparing for the world-wide Council of Youth

The Prior of Taize writes :

October 1972

Seeing so many young people in the church at Taizé, I never tire of thinking : what are we all searching for, together ? Certainly not some projection of our inner desires, nor some kind of routine. But a way of living intensely — of living a creation with Christ ; that reaching down to the sources, praying.

Who would claim to know how to pray ? But Christ « helps us in our weakness ». In what underlies our human make-up — that whole universe somehow beyond our consciousness — he prays within us more than we imagine, more than in any explicit prayer expressed through words. The essential in praying takes place chiefly in great silence ... and one day, later on, comes the realisation that a change has occured.

Praying without any idea of usefulness, but so as to create, as free persons, a communion with Christ. That happiness, proper to free men, overflows towards others. It is the source of all our struggling — for every man, together with every man.

Roger, your brother

Seized at our very roots...

Three months of youth meetings in Taizé. What has characterised them has been their density and intensity. Perhaps it is impossible to convey the essential of these meetings ; this searching by each person when all are united three times a day for the common prayer, these long moments which many spend alone in the church during the day or night...

Coming from a hundred different countries, each one of these young people is searching. And the searching of each one is essential. As we live the preparation for the Council of Youth, wherever we are, on no matter which continent, every one of us is dependent on the others. As we go right to the limits of our searching, we shall together find ways of bringing men together through a new bond of communion. Each person's search is pursued in a hidden, underground way, but every time that we find refreshment — through a meeting, a visit, a letter — a path is already opened up for us to anticipate this communion.

One evening, Joseph, from Kinshasa, expressed it in this way :

I have discovered many young people through personal meetings. Perhaps I had already talked with them in a tent session or during a meal ; about the consumer society, the Third World, the Fourth World or the institutions of the Church. But it was through individual contact that scarcely perceptible aspects of the preparation of the Council of Youth came to the surface. I realised that beneath the formulation of the « joyful news », there exists a kind of current in each one of us, taking hold of us at our very roots. That the problems which we seem to talk about theoretically in our groups are sorrowfully lived out by each one deep within himself. That behind the commitments of one sort or another, there lies each person's resolution to struggle against the oppressions in our society. It is fantastic to meet each other at this level... even if only to know quite simply that this Council which will be gathered round the Risen Christ already means so much in the life of others. How are we not immediately sure of this force which is carrying us and leading us ?... Beneath the bark of the « joyful news » there is this call call within us.

Throughout all the summer a new international Youth Week begins each monday. Three types of activities are possible :
— a week of silence, with only a few meetings to nourish one's personal prayer — with a large silent area which had been set out for this purpose.
— a meeting for those who are discovering the preparation of the Council of Youth.
— a meeting for those who are already living the preparation of the Council of Youth and who want to go further in their search.

In these last two, different sorts of meetings follow each other throughout the week :
— the tents — which means groups of fifty or sixty people in which the various activities of the week are brought together — a programme which is lived out in small groups, which are a way of living together in which each person is known by the others.
— the workshops — where themes are proposed which make clear the « joyful news », and each person chooses a theme according to his particular interests.

On saturday evening Brother Roger meets all the young people and talks to them about those events which have marked the week.

Signs of contradiction

The theme which is common to all the meetings is the theme of the whole year : how to become signs of contradiction according to the Gospel ? Margarita Moyano, from Argentina, has spoken about this more than once :

Since the beginning of the preparation of the Council of Youth we have been marching stage by stage : living this liberating festival had led us to understand that we need to break off with the situations of oppression where man is victim of man, in order to be real promoters of communion. To give one's life, to refuse privileges : this means living a « subversive » faith, that is a faith which overthrows those absolute values which are false — efficiency, power and profit. This is in a way like rowing against the current. Becoming a sign of contradiction is not an end in itself. It is a consequence of having lived the Gospel completely...

He who accepts, for the sake of the Risen Christ, to become a sign of contradiction does not seek to become a sign of provocation, or even less of « purity », who would

judge and condemn others. He attempts rather by his life to be, along with others, a sign of anticipation of a new society, of a new Church. He is attempting, for example, to show that faithfulness to a lasting commitment and to love constantly are possible. Then this life, understood as a sign of fidelity to the Gospel, will reveal to others the possibility of changing their own lives, and the situations which condition them, and they will discover their capacities to wait together for man's tomorrow.

The age of the catacombs

Isabelle, from Paris, has come back from a journey in one of those countries — be it the northern or southern hemisphere — whose names cannot be disclosed, so as not to compromise the christians living there :

When the world will no longer receive christians, they go down into the catacombs. In great secrecy, they meet together in small groups in the night, underground. To have come here at all is a great risk and the faces are serious with the emotion of meeting again. But now the mortuary chamber becomes a banquet hall. Songs are raised up in thanksgiving, and the galleries carry the prayer step by step into the rooms around, where we guess that others are together : « So that the eyes of our brothers may be opened... and for those whom they imprison in solitude... » These men are praying without making any distinction between those on the surface and those in deep places. They have met for the time of the wedding-feast, and then each one goes away again, nourished by a new fire, to carry love into the market places and to meet our gaze with their transparent eyes.

It is time to go back to the catacombs : in order to prepare for rebirths is it not necessary to go back into the depths of the earth ? External pressures from all sides are pushing christians to meet together in secret... and we are at this stage ! When a cell or a community begins to live

according to the values of the Gospel, it soon finds itself rejected. But let us not be afraid of isolation : for between us there is forming a sort of network of galleries whose extent goes beyond frontiers. When we were abroad, visiting a community of young people who know the hatred the world has for them and for the Church, one of them said to us : « *Together we have taken commitments which we cannot go back on, because Christ is pushing us forward.* » Speaking about the preparation for the Council of Youth, he added : « *It is like a peat fire which catches and spreads several feet underground, swells the soil and suddenly bursts out in an explosion* ». This is for us the moment of Easter Saturday : Christ has come into our tombs and, when the time comes, he will roll away the stone for us...

Throughout the summer in Taizé, a number of creativity workshops were held (poetry, music, theatre, etc.). This is what Joseph, who led the theatre workshop, has written as a first conclusion :

« *In our youth meetings for the preparation for the Council of Youth, there exist the finest conditions for the birth of a theatre language, for it has been noticed that it is in assemblies of peoples that the true realisation of theatre occurs. This phenomenon which we call theatre is really nothing other than the manifestation of a communion. I believe more and more that a theatrical formulation of the 'joyful news' is possible. There is one question that has been raised several times : by means of which symbol, by means of which 'signs of anticipation' can we represent the society which we wish to call into being ? It is easy to weave images and caricatures of the existing society. This may well be because this society is a living reality, whereas we do not know too well what the society to come will be like, and we do not manage at all to imagine it in any other way than through fireworks, confetti and dancing, etc.* »

In Latin America

A letter received from the Dominican Republic :

Europe, with its tourist attractions and multiple pleasures, is in our eyes a place where people may go to complete their studies and do research — we hardly see it as a part of the world where ideas and initiatives for freeing Latin America could emerge. What people understand by the Church is totally different as well. In our country the language of political involvement is quickly grasped. We think differently about faith because we live in a society needing liberation -- we do not know just what in concrete terms — and are facing up to a situation of challenge which is ever complicated. All the same, we live on in hope and struggle and die for the same causes as you talk about and discuss. Some time ago four communists were killed in a struggle with the police and army after having robbed a bank. To them it was not a theft but « the people making an economic recuperation to finance the revolutionary struggle ». Can we christians continue to simply discuss the liberation of man whilst our brothers fight and die for it ? Who is really bringing about freedom ? And promoting it ? Violence or non-violence ? Time passes, the days go by and the long-awaited, decisive moment fails to arrive, through lack of determination. We have to find out « how to be fully consequent ». We are continuing in the search for an interior adventure with Christ. This written link between us is already someting great because it allows us to live in real communion with one another.

The *Letter from Taizé* will be published in Finnish and Dutch too from now on !

Four times during the week, everyone meets in different « workshops », to deepen their understanding of some aspect of the « joyful news ». The main topics were : The struggle for man as related to contemplation ; Giving our life through trade-union, political and professional committments ; Believing in the resurrection ; Living out the happiness of the beatitudes in our societies ; Struggling for a different form of society ; Dare to become poor ; Reflection about the bases of our faith ; A theater workshop on the themes of the « joyful news » ; Giving the Church a new face ; What christians and non-christians can mean to one another ; How people of different cultures and backgrounds might learn to share together ; etc.

Every wednesday evening there are « carrefours » — discussions taking-up topics suggested in the course of the week : How do we become ourselves, realise our possibilities, reach fulfillment ? Living out faith in political involvement. Why study, in whose interest ? Friendship : illusion or committment ? Relationships between parents and children. Prayer -- high moments, and continuity. International racism. Life committment within the Church. Money. Creating new relationships between students and workers. How not to get settled-down ? Musical and poetical creation. Educate — and being educated. Foreign workers in Europe. How to break-down barriers and share with all ? All these, and yet other topics related to urgent political themes of the moment.

Two South Americans in Spain

Nestor and Olga, a young Latino-American couple who have given a year to the preparation of the Council of Youth, returning from a journey, write :

We have spent a month travelling in Southern Spain, in Andaluz. We contacted a lot of young people, workers mainly, but students as well. We were struck by the fact that it was the humblest among them, those most on the edge of society, whose committments were the deepest and most demanding. The « joyful news » was both an expression of their lives and a challenge to them. They were thrilled to learn that there were other young people of other cultures, other beliefs who, like them, were following a demanding committment — demanding for themselves, lived for others, for the Church.

We also discovered in our travels that for young people living comfortably, with a degree of security, the « joyful news » represented a challenge that not everyone was ready to take up. In Seville, a girl attending a very expensive school remarked : « *No way for me to live that with my style of life* », and because of that she rejected the whole announcement. That made us think. She had certainly realised that the « joyful news » demands a radical change in one's way of living : a difficult and painful passing from the old man to the new. Not everyone has the strength to do it, so they turn their backs. She went on to add : « *Only people with problems can live like that, or a worker, say, not me in any case.* » Her words helped us to see how the « news » does not evoke some theoretical judgement such as « it's well written, I like it » or « it lacks doctrinal vigour »... but it rather demands that we opt for a style of living : either our present one, without cares, or else that difficult one that we want to risk living. When presented with the « news », one can only say : « That is my life, or that is not my life ».

In Spain we were particularly struck by one attitude. Many young people see an alternative : struggling to stop man being the victim of man, or belonging to the Church. We have never seen the question like that. On the contrary, we daily join more with the conviction shared by many other young Latin Americans : being the Church obliges us to struggle for man's liberation.

Political struggle

Marie-Paule :

Because of the Council of Youth, I find a great need to be involved in a political struggle in favour of man. And in it one confronts tensions that are almost unbearable, when class-influenced options cause clashes or when mili-

tants and 'on-lookers' meet head-on. I think that the preparation of the Council of Youth must enable us to accept these tensions. It must help young people become aware of situations of exploitation and oppression, but even more, after that, to stick together — avoiding hardening of attitudes and any final breaks. On a practical level, we can already try to live out the encounter of people from different backgrounds, ages, political persuasions, or beliefs. But we must think up a way for the Council of Youth to be more of a support in our daily struggle.

Struggle in the Church

Riccarda from Berlin :

The preparation for the Council of Youth has opened up a new perspective for me : living the contradiction of my personal committment in a struggle for and against the Church.

The result is a kind of synthesis, sending one to that point of intimate solitude where festival springs into being : the central nucleus. The contradiction can only be resolved there, making that nucleus into the focus of an inward unifying.

Trying to realise this unification of myself, and the search for unity with others, without running away from the real contradictions, has made me see the real sense of the Church. I picture to myself a Church born anew from many such unifying nuclei. The deeper the unity, the further it leads. And the stronger the tensions resolved, the greater surely the resulting strength.

The fact that we do not as yet know what this coming strength will be like, and that an ever stronger hope is inspiring us, are the things most appealing to me in the preparation for the Council of Youth.

From bondage to liberation

Angelina, from Barcelona, writes about some of the discussion that went on every week in the meeting she was leading :

What are the concerns that are making themselves felt in my surroundings ? I know that everything is not wonderful... looking at the realities that make up my daily life, I would like to create a new way of living. I want to bring about change. As Easter is the transition from death to resurrection, so the « joyful news » announces for us that the possibility of transition exists, of passing from tension to coherence, from oppression to communion, from bondage to liberation, from indifference to conscientisation, from naive consciousness to critical consciousness, from winter to a springtime of the Church, from intollerance to love, from division to reconciliation...

But to live this means taking risks. It is not easy to make my life into a constant transition : my life means my interior life just as much as external situations on which I can bring no pressure to bear. As the chrysalid has to burst open the cocoon in order to fly, so the transition which we are trying to live does not take place without pain. It is hard, and it brings suffering. For it is really a question of birth, and rebirth.

But where do we find the strength for these rebirths ? From what source ? Becoming signs of a new creation, becoming signs of contradiction according to the Gospel means knowing times of discouragement, and yet going on : taking one step forward, the first one, and continuing, making a second step forward, and the next... But what is the source of our perseverance ? The Risen Christ : for he is revealing the strength of the love within us, he is making us transparent, and in turn he makes us become men who reveal the forces of love in the world.

Preparing for the Council of Youth alone

I am trying to follow all that mass of youth who have set out on this crazy adventure! My own situation is a working one and I find there that through events, a conversation, or even a look, I am constantly being forced to take a stand. So every day, I ask Christ to give me enough strength and imagination. I feel very strongly the need for a cell-group to help me go forward, to stop me getting stuck in a rut, to give me courage. But so far I haven't found anybody who wants an experience of sharing, of real committment, of more frequent communion with God. And so, I try on my own to offer all this to God. I want you to know how numerous are those who are living the preparation for the Council of Youth on their own, and whose one cell-group companion is Christ.

From cell to base-community

Someone tells how his cell developed :

We began one year ago. Not all of us had been to Taizé, but our searching — like that of so many young people in so many places — coincided with the lines of the Council of Youth. We were encouraged by the awareness that lots of other groups like ours are trying to live the joyful news of the Risen Christ in all kinds of local situations.

To start with, we were inclined to go round in circles, or to float, not knowing one another very well and being afraid to drop our masks. Slowly things have changed. Often we have talked over a particular Gospel text, with those of the cell who are non-believers. And I feel that the fact of exchanging in great depth between christians and non-christians has enriched us all enormously. They too want every man to be able to have access to 'festival' — meaning for them living a real fulness.

For all of us, festival goes with struggling for justice : so long as I oppress someone, I cannot live any true festival — and neither can he.

So several of us are looking in the direction of political or trade-union action.

Already a number of us are involved in teaching North-African immigrants and their families to read and write.

The situation of these North Africans in our town is impossible to accept : appalling housing conditions — without water or electricity, the children playing among the garbage... The usual wrongs at work : additional hours not paid-for, incorrect pay-slips, security regulations not complied-with... But, worst of all, being rejected, being forced into a ghetto. Nobody makes any attempt to know them better ; and fear engenders hatred. Yet... Without idealising, we can say how much meeting them has taught us : we were, still are, amazed by their sense of hospitality (so forgotten in our society !). And their readiness to share — having very little, they are ready to pool all.

And so we advance, drawing on the source of the Risen Christ.

Our little cell is now a « grass-roots community ». We pray together more often, we share financially and we are looking for ways of helping each other more in life.

We find it essential to continue now during the holiday season, when tourism, with its oppulent facade, tries to hide how many are poor.

That is our way of living the « joyful news » here. We have no intention of this being an example to copy. But we feel we have begun something together, and in a communion with many all over the world.

So as to « leap over the wall » that we build around ourselves, to break out of our own prisons and find a real freedom within us, it was possible every day, at Taizé, for all to meet personally in the church of Reconciliation a brother or priest.

A festival marked the middle of each week : centred at various points, calm meditation for poetry reading and singing, bursting with enthusiasm for dance and expression, listenting to African story-telling, jumping and dancing to popular music, be it Austrian accordeon or Basque pipes...

A full week of intense meeting needs one day of silence, of retreat : time to sum everything up and soak in all the words heard, the faces seen... and unleash imaginations for the next, vital step : what am I going to invent as a way of changing my life in the time to come, so as to avoid falling back into hundrum existence ?

Giving our life...

Barry, a young black American, who has opened his house to the young delinquants in his home town, said before he left Taizé :

My time here is characterised by a feelting of unity which transcends all language barriers and cultural differences. It is a feeling of familiarity and empathy, despite the absence of prior contact.

The « joyful news » has served to reaffirm my personal committment to struggle to prevent man from being victim of man. The glad tidings of the « joyful news » comes to me as a ray of hope, penetrating the gloomy realities of life lived in a capitalistic society. Because of this hope, I will continue to pursue this committment with a relentless perseverance which can only be equalled by the struggle for life itself.

The preparation for the Council of Youth can be described as a willingness to give that which is most precious, my life, for the sake of others. A willingness to give, not for the sake of recognition or self-agrandizement, but simply because it is necessary.

Upon my return to the United States, I envisage the implementation of a life-style of selflessness and simplicity, devoid of a social or cultural classification, which is visibly neutral yet sensitive to all of mankind.

In Africa

Dieudonné and Joseph, from the Cameroon, Nestor and Gaby, from the Central African Republic, Daniel, from Togo... students from the Ivory Coast... have been, throughout the summer, like living letters written by the young people of Africa. This is how Dieudonné spoke of his searching :

Every time someone asks : « Can the Council of Youth be prepared for in Africa ? », I feel ill at ease.

In such a case it seems to me that the Council of Youth is being looked upon like, for example, an article of clothing belonging to someone — he might be able to lend it to someone else whom it would suit better. And then, it is no longer about life.

Yet during this week we are living something fantastic, the simplicity, the openness, the trust in others, the willingness to listen, the talking together — we sometimes manage to forget about colour and continent, for everyone realises that we are brothers and sisters.

Here is the real question, as I see it : « How can we share all this store of riches gathered in us, back in Africa, with our friends at home ? » I know very well that, put this way, the question becomes difficult when you look at the realities of life. Those at Taizé have undertaken something, before arriving. That makes us rather like the seeds of corn selected for the sowing of a new harvest — we at once find common ground, since we are hastening after the same basic aspirations. When we go back into everyday life, we notice how hard it is, with all the obstacles — impossible even. But if we begin to look at what is already happening in Africa in the way of efforts made, of riches in political and social spheres, youth-groups, cells... we shall realise that the barriers are strong, but that if we try to reconcile the scattered energy, then those barriers finish by falling. For me the important thing is to be hopeful, to let oneself be guided by Christ, for by his dying and rising, he has opened the way for us and I feel that this struggle cannot happen without his being aware of it, since he was the first to give his life so that men could be united and live in love.

Every monday this summer has seen between 1500 and 2500 young people arriving at Taizé, according to the week, for the different meetings. They came from a hundred or so countries. All in all, 60,000 young people have already stayed at Taizé between January and September.

Although the summer meetings are over, there are still many people coming and each week spontaneous sessions are improvised.

The possibility of the meeting of silence is always available.

The next international meetings :

All Saints : two possibilities :
28 October - 1 November ; 1 - 5 November.
Christmas : four possibilities :
23 - 31 December ; 26 - 31 December ;
30 December - 7 January ; 2 - 7 January.

Age : 18 to 29 yrs old. 75p. UK).
Cost : suggested contribution of 9 francs per day (= 2 dollars USA ;
Accommodation : in November, under canvas. At Christmas in dormitories (bring blankets).

Please register in advance, using the registration form, sending it to :
YOUTH MEETINGS, 71460 - Taizé-Community, France

First Name :

Surname :

Full address :

(with zip-code and country)

Profession : ..... year of birth : ....

Will take part in the meeting from ..... to .....

Has already taken part in a meeting at Taizé : yes / no.

Will bring own tent : yes / no.

Can help in the reception/work teams *(arrive one day early)* : yes-no.

Can undertake simultaneous translation from ..... into .....

Remember the questions put to you at Easter !

Starting out from what you yourselves are experiencing, send us replies, or bits of replies, to the Easter questions, before the end of this year.

1) How, concretely, do you envisage the Council of Youth (ways of working, themes, etc.) ?

2) Taking into account the great diversity of countries and situations, what life-style can be imagined, for those wanting to intensify the preparation of the Council of Youth and who are not afraid to becomes signs of contradiction, according to the Gospel, rather than let themselves be taken over by the system that they live under (money, profit, consumer society, careerism, etc.) ?

3) What are the means of being (alone, in cells or in communities) bearers of the festival of the Risen Christ, and how to transmit this in our societies, unbalanced as they are by abundance or poverty ?

4) How to help find a new face for the Church, allowing it to be bearer of that liberating festival for men ?

5) What really new individual or communal acts of courage can be imagined, so as to continue to struggle in poverty of heart, even going so far as to give ones life so that man be no longer victim of man ?

For the USA. A contribution of 2.00 Dollars is requested from those who receive the *Letter from Taizé* to defray publication expenses and postage : « *Letter from Taizé* »
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